

Karen Armstrong - Muhammad

## 1 · Muhammad the Enemy

It has been difficult for Western people to understand the violent Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie's fictional portrait of Muhammad in *The Satanic Verses*. It seemed incredible that a novel could inspire such murderous hatred, a reaction which was regarded as proof of the incurable intolerance of Islam. It was particularly disturbing for people in Britain to learn that the Muslim communities in their own cities lived according to different, apparently alien values and were ready to defend them to the death. But there were also uncomfortable reminders of the Western past in this tragic affair. When British people watched the Muslims of Bradford burning the novel, did they relate this to the bonfires of books that had blazed in Christian Europe over the centuries? In 1242, for example, King Louis IX of France, a canonised saint of the Roman Catholic Church, condemned the Jewish Talmud as a vicious attack on the person of Christ. The book was banned and copies were publicly burned in the presence of the King. Louis had no interest in discussing his differences with the Jewish communities of France in a peaceful, rational way. He once claimed that the only way to debate with a Jew was to kill him 'with a good thrust in the belly as far as the sword will go'.<sup>1</sup> It was Louis who called the first Inquisition to bring Christian heretics to justice and burned not merely their books but hundreds of men and women. He was also a Muslim-hater and led two crusades against the Islamic world. In Louis' day it was not Islam but the Christian West which found it impossible to coexist with others. Indeed, the bitter history of Muslim-Western relations can be said to have begun with an attack on Muhammad in Muslim Spain.

In 850 a monk called Perfectus went shopping in the *souk* of Cordova, capital of the Muslim state of al-Andalus. Here he was accosted by a group of Arabs who asked him whether Jesus or Muhammad was the greater prophet. Perfectus understood at once that it was a trick question, because it was a capital offence in the Islamic empire to insult Muhammad, and at first he responded cautiously. But suddenly he snapped and burst into a passionate stream of abuse, calling the Prophet of Islam a charlatan, a sexual pervert and Antichrist himself. He was immediately swept off to goal.

This incident was unusual for Cordova, where Christian-Muslim relations were normally good. Like the Jews, Christians were allowed full religious liberty within the Islamic empire and most Spaniards were proud to belong to such an advanced culture, light years ahead of the rest of Europe. They were often called 'Mozarabs' or 'Arabisers'.

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas! all talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Alvaro, the Spanish layman who wrote this attack on the Mozarabs at about this time, saw the monk Perfectus as a cultural and religious hero. His denunciation of Muhammad had inspired a strange minority movement in Cordova whereby men and women presented themselves before the Qadi, the Islamic judge, and proved their Christian loyalty by a vitriolic and suicidal attack on the Prophet.

When Perfectus had arrived in gaol he had been extremely frightened, and the Qadi decided not to pass the death sentence because he judged that Perfectus had been unfairly provoked by the Muslims. But after a few days Perfectus cracked a second time and insulted Muhammad in such crude terms that the Qadi had no option but to apply the full rigour of the law. The monk was executed, and at once a group of Christians, who seem to have lived on the fringes of society, dismembered his body and began to revere relics of their 'martyr'. A few days later another monk called Ishaq appeared before the Qadi and attacked Muhammad and his religion with such passion that the Qadi, thinking him either drunk or deranged, slapped him to bring him to his senses. But Ishaq persisted in his abuse and the Qadi could not continue to permit this flagrant violation of the law.

Ninth-century Cordova was not like Bradford in 1988. The Muslims were powerful and confident. They seemed extremely reluctant to put these Christian fanatics to death, partly because they did not seem in control of their faculties but also because they realised that the last thing they needed was a martyr-cult. Muslims were not averse to hearing about other religions. Islam had been born in the religious pluralism of the Middle East, where the various faiths had coexisted for centuries. The Eastern Christian empire of Byzantium likewise permitted minority religious groups liberty to practise their faith and to manage their own religious affairs. There was no law against propaganda efforts by Christians in the Islamic empire, provided that they did not attack the beloved figure of the Prophet Muhammad. In some parts of the empire there was even an established tradition of scepticism and freethinking which was

tolerated as long as it kept within the bounds of decency and was not too disrespectful. In Cordova the Qadi and the Amir, the prince, were both loath to put Perfectus and Ishaq to death but they could not allow this breach of the law. But a few days after Ishaq's execution, six other monks from his monastery arrived and delivered yet another venomous attack on Muhammad. That summer about fifty martyrs died in this way. They were denounced by the Bishop of Cordova and by the Mozarabs, who were all extremely alarmed by this aggressive cult of martyrdom. But the martyrs found two champions: a priest called Eulogio and Paul Alvaro both argued that the martyrs were 'soldiers of God' who were fighting bravely for their faith. They had mounted a complex moral assault against Islam which was difficult for the Muslim authorities to deal with because it seemed to put them in the wrong.

The martyrs came from all levels of society: they were men and women, monks, priests, laymen, simple folk and sophisticated scholars. But many seem to have been searching for a clear, distinct Western identity. Some appear to have come from mixed homes, with a Muslim and a Christian parent; others had been urged to assimilate too closely with Muslim culture – they had been given Arab names<sup>3</sup> or had been pushed into a career in the civil service – and felt disoriented and confused. The loss of cultural roots can be a profoundly disturbing experience and even in our own day it can produce an aggressive, defiant religiosity as a means of asserting the beleaguered self. Perhaps we should remember the martyrs of Cordova when we feel bewildered by the hostility and rage in some of the Muslim communities in the West and in other parts of the world where Western culture threatens traditional values. The martyr movement led by Alvaro and Eulogio was as bitterly opposed to the Christian Mozarabs as to the Muslims and accused them of being cultural defectors. Eulogio made a visit to Pamplona in neighbouring Christendom and came back with Western books: texts of the Latin Fathers of the Church and Roman classical works by Vergil and Juvenal. He wanted to resist the Arabisation of his fellow Spaniards and create a Latin renaissance which looked back with nostalgia to the Roman past of his country as a way of neutralising the influence of the dominant Muslim culture. The movement fizzled out when Eulogio himself was put to death by the Qadi, who begged him to save his life by making a token submission to Islam – nobody would check his subsequent religious behaviour – and not give in to this 'deplorable and fatal self-destruction' like the other 'fools and idiots'.<sup>4</sup> But Eulogio merely told him to sharpen his sword.

This curious incident was uncharacteristic of life in Muslim Spain. For the next 600 years members of the three religions of historical monotheism were able to live together in relative peace and harmony: the Jews,

who were being hounded to death in the rest of Europe, were able to enjoy a rich cultural renaissance of their own. But the story of the martyrs of Cordova reveals an attitude that would become common in the West. At that time Islam was a great world power while Europe, overrun by barbarian tribes, had become a cultural backwater. Later the whole world would seem to be Islamic, rather as it seems Western today, and Islam was a continuous challenge to the West until the eighteenth century. Now it seems that the Cold War against the Soviet Union is about to be replaced by a Cold War against Islam.

Eulogio and Alvaro both believed that the rise of Islam was a preparation for the advent of Antichrist, the great pretender described in the New Testament, whose reign would herald the Last Days. The author of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians had explained that Jesus would not return until the 'Great Apostasy' had taken place: a rebel would establish his rule in the Temple of Jerusalem and mislead many Christians with his plausible doctrines.<sup>5</sup> The Book of Revelation also spoke of a great Beast, marked with the mysterious number 666, who would crawl out of the abyss, enthrone himself on the Temple Mount and rule the world.<sup>6</sup> Islam seemed to fit these ancient prophecies perfectly. The Muslims had conquered Jerusalem in 638, had built two splendid mosques on the Temple Mount and did indeed seem to rule the world. Even though Muhammad had lived after Christ, when there was no need for a further revelation, he had set himself up as a prophet and many Christians had apostasised and joined the new religion. Eulogio and Alvaro had in their possession a brief life of Muhammad, which had taught them that he had died in the year 666 of the Era of Spain, which was thirty-eight years ahead of conventional reckoning. This late eighth century Western biography of Muhammad had been produced in the monastery of Leyre near Pamplona on the hinterland of the Christian world, which trembled before the mighty Islamic giant. Besides the political threat, the success of Islam raised a disturbing theological question: how had God allowed this impious faith to prosper? Could it be that he had deserted his own people?

The diatribes against Muhammad uttered by the Cordovan martyrs had been based on this apocalyptic biography. In this fear-ridden fantasy, Muhammad was an impostor and a charlatan, who had set himself up as a prophet to deceive the world; he was a lecher who had wallowed in disgusting debauchery and inspired his followers to do the same; he had forced people to convert to his faith at swordpoint. Islam was not an independent revelation, therefore, but a heresy, a failed form of Christianity; it was a violent religion of the sword that glorified war and slaughter. After the demise of the martyr movement in Cordova, a few

people in other parts of Europe heard their story, but there was little reaction. Yet around 250 years later, when Europe was about to re-enter the international scene, Christian legends would reproduce this fantastic portrait of Muhammad with uncanny fidelity. Some serious scholars would attempt to achieve a more objective view of the Prophet and his religion, but this fictional portrait of 'Mahound' persisted at a popular level. He became the great enemy of the emerging Western identity, standing for everything that 'we' hoped we were not. Traces of the old fantasy survive to the present day. It is still common for Western people to take it for granted that Muhammad had simply 'used' religion as a way of achieving world conquest or to assert that Islam is a violent religion of the sword, even though there are many scholarly and objective studies of Islam and its Prophet that disprove this myth of Mahound.

By the end of the eleventh century, Europe was beginning to rise again under the Pope and was pushing back the frontiers of Islam. In 1061 the Normans had started to attack the Muslims in southern Italy and Sicily, conquering the area in 1091; the Christians of northern Spain had begun the Wars of Reconquest against the Muslims of al-Andalus and conquered Toledo in 1085; in 1095 Pope Urban II summoned the knights of Europe to liberate the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem in the expedition that would become known as the First Crusade. In 1099, after years of incredible hardship, the Crusaders managed to conquer Jerusalem and establish the first Western colonies in the Near East. This new Western success took the form of an out-and-out war against Islam, but at the start nobody in Europe had any particular hatred of the Muslim religion or its Prophet. They were more concerned with their own dreams of glory and the extension of papal Europe. The *Song of Roland*, which was composed at the time of the First Crusade, shows a revealing ignorance of the essential nature of the Islamic faith. The Muslim enemies of Charlemagne and Roland are depicted as idol-worshippers, bowing down before a trinity of the 'gods' Apollo, Tervagant and Mahomet, but they are valiant soldiers whom it was a pleasure to fight. When the armies of the First Crusade fought the Turks for the first time in Asia Minor, they were also full of respect and admiration for their courage:

What man, however experienced and learned, would dare to write of the skill and prowess and courage of the Turks, who thought that they would strike terror into the Franks as they had done into the Arabs and Saracens, Armenians, Syrians and Greeks, by the menace of their arrows? Yet, please God, their men will never be as good as ours. They have a saying that they are of common stock with the Franks and are naturally born to be knights. This is true and nobody can deny it, that if only they had stood firm in the faith of Christendom and been willing to accept One God in Three Persons. . . . you could not find stronger or braver or

more skilful soldiers; and yet by God's grace they were beaten by our men.<sup>7</sup>

The Franks had felt kinship with the Muslim soldiers at the battle of Dorylaeum in 1097, but two years later when the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem they seemed unable to see the Muslims as human beings like themselves. They slaughtered the inhabitants of the city in cold blood in a massacre which shocked even their own contemporaries. After this, Muslims were regarded as vermin to be cleared away from the holy places: the official word for them in Crusading jargon is 'filth'.

Before 1100 there was practically no interest in Muhammad in Europe, but by 1120 everybody knew who he was. At about the same time as the myths of Charlemagne, King Arthur and Robin Hood were being evolved in the West, the myth of Mahound, the enemy and shadow-self of Christendom, was firmly established in the Western imagination. As R. W. Southern explains in his monograph *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*:

There can be little doubt that at the moment of their formation these legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe. But as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own. At the level of popular poetry, the picture of Mahomet and his Saracens changed very little from generation to generation. Like well-loved characters of fiction, they were expected to display certain characteristics, and authors faithfully reproduced them for hundreds of years.<sup>8</sup>

Mahound's fictional status in the West has perhaps made it even more difficult for people to see him as an historical character who deserves the same serious treatment as Napoleon or Alexander the Great. The fictional portrait of Mahound in *The Satanic Verses* resonates deeply with these established Western fantasies.

To explain Muhammad's success, the legends claimed that he had been a magician who had concocted false 'miracles' to take in the credulous Arabs and destroy the Church in Africa and the Middle East. One tale spoke of a white bull which had terrorised the population and which finally appeared with the Qu'ran, the scripture which Muhammad had brought to the Arabs, floating miraculously between its horns. Muhammad was also said to have trained a dove to peck peas from his ears so that it looked as though the Holy Spirit were whispering into them. His mystical experiences were explained away by the claim that he was an epileptic, which at that time was tantamount to saying that he was possessed by demons. His sexual life was dwelt on in prurient detail: he was credited with every perversion known to men and was said to have attracted people into his religion by encouraging them to indulge their basest instincts. There was nothing genuine in Muhammad's claims: he

had been a cold-blooded impostor who had taken in nearly all his own people. Those of his followers who had seen through his preposterous ideas had kept quiet because of their own base ambition. The one way that Western Christians could explain Muhammad's compelling and successful religious vision was to deny its independent inspiration: Islam was a breakaway form of Christianity, the heresy of all heresies. It was said that one Sergius, an heretical monk, had been rightly forced to flee Christendom and had met Muhammad in Arabia, where he had coached him in his distorted version of Christianity. Without the sword, 'Muhammadanism' would never have flourished: Muslims were still forbidden to discuss religion freely in the Islamic empire. But Muhammad had come to a fitting end: during one of his demonic convulsions he had been torn apart by a herd of pigs.

Some details of this fantasy reflect Christian anxieties about their own emergent identity. Islam was stigmatised as the 'religion of the sword' during the Crusades, a period when Christians themselves must have had a buried worry about this aggressive form of their faith which bore no relation to the pacifist message of Jesus. At a time when the Church was imposing celibacy on a reluctant clergy, the astonishing accounts of Muhammad's sexual life reveal far more about the repressions of Christians than about the facts of the Prophet's own life. There is a definite note of ill-concealed envy in this depiction of 'Islam' as a self-indulgent and easygoing religion. Finally it was the West, not 'Islam', which forbade the open discussion of religious matters. At the time of the Crusades, Europe seemed obsessed by a craving for intellectual conformity and punished its deviants with a zeal that has been unique in the history of religion. The witch-hunts of the inquisitors and the persecution of Protestants by Catholics and *vice versa* were inspired by abstruse theological opinions which in both Judaism and Islam were seen as private and optional matters. Neither Judaism nor Islam share the Christian conception of heresy, which raises human ideas about the divine to an unacceptably high level and almost makes them a form of idolatry. The period of the Crusades, when the fictional Mahound was established, was also a time of great strain and denial in Europe. This is graphically expressed in the phobia about Islam.

It was becoming apparent that Western Christians were not going to be able to accommodate different religious communities and ideologies within their own systems as successfully as either the Muslims or the Byzantines. The only other alien religion on European soil was Judaism, and the First Crusaders had begun their journey to the Middle East by massacring the Jewish communities along the Rhine valley in the first mass pogroms of Europe. Anti-Semitism would become an incurable

European disease during the Crusading period and, at the same time as Christians evolved the myths about Mahound and the Saracens, they also evolved terrifying fantasies about the Jews. Jews were said to murder little children and mix their blood in the Passover bread, to desecrate the Eucharist and to be engaged in a vast international conspiracy for the overthrow of Christendom. There was nothing like these anti-Jewish myths in the Islamic world; they reveal in the Western psyche an unhealthy disturbance and disease. But the conquests in Spain, southern Italy and Sicily meant that there were now tens of thousands of Muslims within the borders of Christendom. The only way that the establishment seemed able to cope with these aliens was by imposing an official policy of apartheid, forbidding Christians to have any contact with their Muslim and Jewish neighbours. Special Church legislation linked the two together as a common foe in the Lateran Councils of 1179 and 1215. Christians were forbidden on pain of excommunication and the consequent confiscation of their property to take service in the houses of Muslims and Jews, to look after their children, to trade with Muslims and Jews or even to eat with them. In 1227 Pope Gregory IX added the following decrees: Muslims and Jews must wear distinctive clothing; they must not appear on the streets during Christian festivals or hold public office in Christian countries; and the muezzin was forbidden to offend Christian ears by summoning the Muslims to prayer in the traditional way.

Pope Clement V (1305-14) declared that the Islamic presence on Christian soil was an insult to God. Christians had already begun to expunge this obscenity. In 1301 Charles of Anjou, King of France, exterminated the last Muslims of Sicily and southern Italy in the reservation of Lucera, which he had described as 'a nest of pestilence . . . lurid in pollution . . . the stubborn plague and filthy infection of Apulia'.<sup>9</sup> In 1492 the final Islamic stronghold in Europe was destroyed when Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada: all over Europe church bells pealed joyfully at the Christian victory over the infidel. A few years later Spanish Muslims were given the choice of deportation or conversion. Many preferred to leave Europe but some did convert to Christianity, and they and their descendants were persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition for another 300 years. The spirit of the martyrs of Cordova had replaced the old tolerance, and Spanish Christians now seemed haunted by a fear of crypto-Muslims, living in their midst as the hidden enemies of society.

The unhealthy Western attitude to Islam was often revealed in a schizophrenic reaction. Thus the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II was an Islamophile who was genuinely more at home in the Muslim world than in Christian Europe, but at the same time he systematically killed and

deported the Muslims from his native Sicily. While Christians were butchering Muslims in the Near East, others were sitting at the feet of Muslim scholars in Spain. Christian, Jewish and Mozarabic scholars co-operated in a vast translation project, bringing the learning of the Islamic world to the West and restoring to Europe the classical and ancient wisdom that had been lost in the Dark Ages. The Muslim philosophers Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd were venerated as intellectual luminaries, though it became increasingly difficult for people to accommodate the fact that they were both Muslims. The problem was graphically shown in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd (known in Europe as Avicenna and Averroes) are in Limbo with the virtuous pagans who had founded the intellectual culture that they had helped the West to acquire: Euclid, Ptolemy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Yet Muhammad himself is in the Eighth Circle of Hell, with the schismatics. He suffers a particularly disgusting punishment:

No cask stove in by cant or middle ever  
So gaped as one I saw there, from the chin  
Down to the fart-hole split as by a cleaver.

His tripes hung by his heels; the pluck and spleen  
Showed with the liver and the sordid sack  
That turns to dung the food it swallows in.<sup>10</sup>

Dante still cannot allow Muhammad an independent religious vision. He is a mere schismatic, who had broken away from the parent faith. The scatological imagery reveals the disgust that Islam inspired in the Christian breast, but it also depicts the split in the Western psyche, which sees 'Islam' as an image of everything in itself which it cannot digest. The fear and hatred, which is a complete denial of the loving message of Jesus, also represents a deep wound in the integrity of Western Christianity.

But others were trying to achieve a more objective vision. At a time when Jews and Muslims were being fused in the Christian imagination as the common enemy of civilisation, it is interesting that one of the first positive portraits of Muhammad in the West comes from Peter Alfonsi, a Spanish Jew who had converted to Christianity in 1106 and then lived in England as the doctor of Henry I. He was hostile to Islam, but presents it as a choice that a person who was uncommitted to the 'true' faith might reasonably make. In about 1120, when anti-Islamic hatred was at its height, William of Malmesbury was the first European to distinguish Islam from paganism: 'The Saracens and the Turks both worship God the Creator and venerate Muhammad not as God but as their prophet.'<sup>11</sup> It was an insight that many Westerners have been reluctant to accept: some people are still genuinely surprised to hear that Muslims worship

the same God as Jews and Christians: they imagine that 'Allah' is an entirely different deity, like Jupiter in the Roman pantheon. Others tend to assume that 'Muhammadans' give the same kind of veneration to their Prophet as Christians to Christ.

The difficulty of separating fact from fiction is apparent in the *History of Charlemagne* by the Pseudo-Turpin, which was written some time before 1150. This romance depicts the idolatrous Saracens worshipping Mahomet alongside Apollo and Tervagant, in the usual manner of the *chansons de gestes*. But in the middle of it all, there is a rational debate between Roland and the Muslim giant Ferracutus which recognises that the Muslims worship the one God. At about the same time, the chronicler Otto of Freising denied the myth of Muslim idolatry:

it is known that the whole body of Saracens worship one God and receive the Old Testament law and the rite of circumcision. Nor do they attack Christ or the Apostles. In this one thing alone they are far from salvation – in denying that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God, and in venerating the seducer Mahomet as a great prophet of the supreme God.<sup>12</sup>

By the middle of the twelfth century, therefore, a more accurate view of Islam was beginning to be widespread, but this greater objectivity was not strong enough to oust the myths of hostility. Fact and fantasy lived quite happily side by side and, even when people were genuinely trying to be fair, the old hatred appears at some point. Muhammad is still the impostor and schismatic, even though Otto had a more rational view of his religion.

The most important of these twelfth-century attempts to find a more objective view of Islam was undertaken by Peter the Venerable, the humane Abbot of Cluny. In 1141 he had made a tour of the Benedictine monasteries in Christian Spain and commissioned a team of Christian and Muslim scholars, under the leadership of the Englishman Robert of Ketton, to translate some Islamic texts, a project that was completed in 1143. They produced the first Latin translation of the Qu'ran, a collection of Muslim legends, a Muslim history of the world, an explanation of Islamic teaching and a work of polemic called *The Apology of al-Kindi*. It was a remarkable feat; it gave people in the West the means to make a serious study of Islam for the first time. But it achieved little. By this period the Christians were beginning to suffer major military defeats in the Crusader states in the Near East. There was a new wave of anti-Muslim feeling, orchestrated by Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux. It was not a good time to begin an objective study of the Qu'ran. Peter had written his own treatise, which addressed the Muslim world gently and with affection: 'I approach you, not as men often do, with arms but with words; not with force but with reason, not in hatred but in love. . . . I love you, loving

you I write to you, writing to you I invite you to salvation.'<sup>13</sup> But the title of this treatise was *Summary of the Whole Heresy of the Diabolic Sect of the Saracens*. Few real Muslims, even if they were able to read the Abbot of Cluny's Latin text, would find such an approach sympathetic. Even the kindly Abbot, who demonstrated his opposition to the fanaticism of his time on other occasions, showed signs of the schizophrenic mentality of Europe vis-à-vis Islam. When King Louis VII of France led the Second Crusade to the Middle East in 1147, Peter wrote to him saying that he hoped he would kill as many Muslims as Moses (*sic*) and Joshua had killed Amorites and Canaanites.<sup>14</sup>

In the early thirteenth century, another saintly Christian made an attempt to reach out to the Muslim world in the context of a military crusade. During a lull in the disastrous Fifth Crusade (1218–19), Francis of Assisi appeared in the Christian camp in the Nile delta, crossed the enemy lines and asked to be taken to the Sultan al-Kamil. He is said to have spent three days with the Sultan, expounding the gospel message and urging al-Kamil to become a Christian. Because he did not insult the memory of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims were quite prepared to listen and seem to have been rather impressed by this ragged, dirty fellow. When he left, al-Kamil said: 'Pray for me, that God may deign to show me the law and the faith that are most pleasing to him.' He sent Francis back to the Christian camp 'with every mark of respect and in complete safety'.<sup>15</sup>

But before Francis had set off to the East, he had despatched a party of his Friars Minor to preach to the Muslims in Spain and Africa, and they approached the Islamic world in a very different spirit. Arriving at Seville, they resorted to the techniques of the martyrs of Cordova. First they tried to break into the mosque during the Friday prayers, and when they were driven away they screamed abuse at the Prophet Muhammad outside the palace of the Amir. There was no reaching out to the Saracens with compassion and love during this first major missionary venture to Islam. The Franciscans were not interested in converting the Muslims, but wanted to use them to gain the crown of martyrdom. They became so vociferous that the authorities, who were highly embarrassed by the incident, were forced to imprison them, and to avoid publicity they moved them from one prison to another. They were reluctant to pass the death sentence, but the local Mozarab Christians feared that these fanatics might endanger their own position and they begged the authorities to get rid of them. Eventually the Franciscans were deported to Ceuta in Morocco, where they went straight to the mosque and yet again abused Muhammad as the people assembled for the Friday prayers. Finally the authorities were forced to execute them. When Francis heard this, he is



believed to have exclaimed joyfully: 'Now I know that I have five Friars Minor.'<sup>16</sup>

This attitude seems to have been characteristic of later Franciscan missions. In 1227 another group were executed at Ceuta; they had written home to say that the main object of their mission had been 'the death and damnation of the infidels'.<sup>17</sup> Others went to the Holy Land. James of Vitry, the Bishop of Acre, who disapproved of their methods, explained:

The Saracens listen willingly to the Friars Minor when they speak of the faith of Christ and the teaching of the Gospels. But when their words openly contradict Muhammad, who appears in their sermons as a perfidious liar, they strike them without respect, and if God did not protect them marvellously, would almost murder them and drive them from their cities.<sup>18</sup>

Thus during the Middle Ages, even when people were trying to be fair and objective or approached the Muslim world with the Christian message, hostility erupted, sometimes in a particularly violent form. At the end of the thirteenth century, the Dominican scholar Riccoldo da Monte Croce travelled in Muslim countries and was impressed by the quality of the piety he saw: Muslims put Christians to shame, he wrote. But when he returned home to write the *Disputatio contra Saracenos et Alchoranum*, he simply repeated the old myths. The Western image of Islam was beginning to acquire an authority that was stronger than any contact with real Muslims, however positive. During the age of the Crusades, the West found its soul. Most of our characteristic passions and enthusiasms can be traced back to that period. As Umberto Eco points out in his essay 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages':

In fact both Americans and Europeans are inheritors of the Western legacy, and all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the nation state, as well as the idea of a supernatural federation (under the banner of a German Emperor elected by a Diet that functioned like an electoral convention); the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy happiness. I could add the conflict between church and state, trade unions (albeit in a corporative mode), the technological transformation of labour.<sup>19</sup>

He could also have added: the problem of Islam. After the Middle Ages people in the West continued many of the old medieval mythologies. Many more attempts were made to gain a more positive and objective perspective, but alongside the growing scholarly consensus that 'Islam'

and its Prophet were not the monstrous phenomena that people imagined, the traditional prejudice remained.

The apocalyptic view of Islam promoted by the martyrs of Cordova had continued during the Crusading period, though it was not a major theme. In 1191, when Richard the Lionheart had been travelling to the Holy Land with the Third Crusade, he had met the celebrated Italian mystic Joachim of Fiori at Messina in Sicily. Joachim had told Richard that he would certainly defeat Saladin. He was wrong, but he made some other interesting observations. He believed that the end of the world was at hand and that resurgent Islam was one of the chief instruments of Antichrist, but he added that Antichrist himself was already alive in Rome and was destined to become the Pope. As people in Europe became more critical of their society, Islam became associated with the enemy within. The reformers made the same identification between the faithless papacy (their own arch enemy) and Islam. Thus in the later writings of the fourteenth-century English reformer John Wycliffe, the main faults of 'Islam' were exactly the same as the faults of the Western Church in his own day: pride, greed, violence and the lust for power and possession. 'We Western Mahomets,' he wrote, referring to the Western Church as a whole, 'though we are only a few among the whole body of the Church, think that the whole world will be regulated by our judgement and tremble at our command.'<sup>20</sup> Until the Church returned to the true spirit of the Gospels and to evangelical poverty, this 'Islamic' spirit would grow in the West as well as in the East. This was a subtle transmutation of the old habit of making 'Islam' and its Prophet the opposite of everything that 'we' hoped (or feared) that we were.

Wycliffe had to rely on much unreliable information, but he had read the Qu'ran in translation and thought that he had found important points of comparison between Muhammad and the Church of Rome. Like the Church, he argued, Muhammad had been very cavalier with the Bible, picking out what suited him and discarding the rest. Like the religious orders, Muhammad had made innovations which laid an extra burden on the faithful. Above all, like the Church Muhammad had forbidden any free discussion of religion. Wycliffe had read the old medieval prejudice into certain passages of the Qu'ran, which does not forbid religious discussion *per se* but points out that some kinds of theological debate had been divisive in both of the older religions of the one God and had divided them into warring sects. Some ideas about God could only be speculative guesswork: nobody, for example, could prove the doctrine of the Incarnation, which appeared to Muhammad to have been added by some Christians to the pristine message of the Prophet Jesus. Wycliffe, however, compared this so-called Islamic intolerance to the attitude of

the Church over problematic doctrines like the Eucharist, telling Christians to believe blindly the things that they could not understand.

Luther and the other Protestant reformers continued this habit. At the end of his life, faced with the frightening encroachments of the Ottoman Turks into Europe, Luther shared the nightmare of the martyrs of Cordova and believed that Christendom could be entirely engulfed by Islam. In 1542 he published his own translation of Riccoldo da Monte Croce's *Disputatio*. In his preface, he mentions that he had read it earlier but had found it impossible to accept that people could believe such a manifest tissue of lies. He had wanted to read the Qu'ran but could not find a Latin translation – as R. W. Southern points out, this is a telling indication of the low state of Islamic studies in the sixteenth century – but recently a copy had come into his hands and he had realised that Riccoldo had spoken the truth. He asked whether Muhammad and the Muslims were the Antichrist and replied that 'Islam' was too gross to fulfil this terrible destiny. The real enemy was the Pope and the Catholic Church and, as long as Europe clung to this internal enemy, it laid itself open to the danger of defeat at the hands of the 'Muhammadans'. Zwingli and some of the other reformers put forward similar ideas, seeing Rome as the 'head' of Antichrist and 'Muhammadanism' as its body. This Protestant development shows that 'Islam' had been interiorised by many people in Europe and had become a symbol of absolute evil in their emotional landscape. As Norman Daniel explains in his perceptive study *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, it was no longer an exterior historical reality that could be examined critically like any other. The reformers had 'introduced the idea of Islam as an interior state which may be imputed to the enemies of pure doctrine (however the writer may define it). In so doing they in effect admitted the interiorization of Islam as the "enemy" (undifferentiated) which it had been for so long in the European imagination.'<sup>21</sup> Daniel gives the example of Catholics and Protestants comparing their Christian opponents with 'Islam' but with little understanding of what the comparison really entailed. The seventeenth-century Catholic missionary M. Lefebvre saw Muslims as 'Muhammadan Protestants' who believe in justification by faith: 'they hope for the remission of all their sins, provided they believe in Mahomet'. But the eighteenth-century Protestant travel writer L. Rauwolff saw Muslims as 'Muhammadan Catholics': 'they go after their own invented devotion to good works, alms, prayers, fasting, redeeming of captives etc., to make satisfaction to God'.<sup>22</sup> In the Middle Ages, Christians had been able to see Islam only as a failed version of Christianity, and had created myths to show that Muhammad had been instructed by a heretic. Later, in the light of fresh internal divisions in Christendom, Westerners continued to see

Muhammad and his religion in essentially Christian terms; they seemed concerned with the objective historical truth, nor does it seem to have occurred to them that Muslims had their own independent enthusiasms which could not adequately be defined with reference to Christian practice. But during the Renaissance other Western people were trying to achieve a more objective understanding of the Islamic world. They were carrying on the tradition and aspiration of Peter the Venerable, which had been continued in the fifteenth century by scholars like John of Segovia and Nicholas of Cusa. In 1453, just after the Turks had conquered the Christian empire of Byzantium and brought Islam to the threshold of Europe, John of Segovia pointed out that a new way of coping with the Islamic menace had to be found. It would never be defeated by war or conventional missionary activity. He began work on a new translation of the Qu'ran, collaborating with a Muslim jurist from Salamanca. He also proposed the idea of an international conference, at which there could be an informed exchange of views between Muslims and Christians. John died in 1458, before either of his projects had been brought to fruition, but his friend Nicholas of Cusa had been enthusiastic about this new approach. In 1460 he had written the *Cribratio Alchoran* (The Sieve of the Qu'ran), which was not conducted on the usual polemical lines but attempted the systematic literary, historical and philological examination of the text that John of Segovia had considered essential. During the Renaissance, Arabic studies were instituted and this cosmopolitan and encyclopaedic approach led some scholars to a more realistic assessment of the Muslim world and to an abandonment of cruder Crusading attitudes. But, as in the Middle Ages, the growing appreciation of the facts was not enough to neutralise the old images of hatred, which had such a powerful hold on the Western imagination.

This is very clear in the year 1697, when, at the very beginning of the Enlightenment, two influential works were published. The first was the *Bibliothèque orientale* of Barthélemy d'Herbelot, which remained the most important and authoritative source of reference in Islamic and Oriental studies in England and Europe until the beginning of the nineteenth century. It has been described as the first *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. D'Herbelot had used Arabic, Turkish and Persian sources and had made a real effort to break out of the blinkered Christian approach: he had, for example, given alternative accounts of the creation myths current in the East. This approach could only be positive and was a sign of a healthier spirit. But under the heading 'Mahomet' we find this sadly familiar entry:

This is the famous impostor Mahomet, Author and Founder of a heresy, which has taken on the name of religion, which we call Mohammadan. See entry under *Islam*.



The interpreters of the Alcoran and other Doctors of Muslim or Mohammadan Law have applied to this false prophet all the praises which the Arians, Paulicians, or Paulianists, and other Heretics have attributed to Jesus Christ, while stripping him of his Divinity. . . .<sup>23</sup>

Even though d'Herbelot was aware of the proper name of the religion, he continued to call it 'Mohamniadan' because that was the name that 'we' use; similarly the Christian world could still see the Prophet only in its own distorted way as an inferior version of 'us'.

The same year the English Orientalist Humphry Prideaux published his important *Mahomet: The True Nature of Imposture*. The title alone shows that he had swallowed the old medieval prejudice – indeed, he cites Riccolodo da Monte Croce as his major source – even though he was claiming to have achieved a more rational and enlightened view of religion than had been possible in the benighted and superstitious Middle Ages. As a man of reason, Prideaux argued that not only was Islam a mere imitation of Christianity but it was a clear example of the idiocy to which all religions, Christianity included, could sink if they were not based firmly on the rock of reason. The Age of Reason had supposedly liberated people from the crippling religious prejudice of the Crusading period, but Prideaux repeats all the old irrational obsessions of the past. He wrote of Muhammad:

For the first Part of his Life he led a very wicked and licentious Course, much delighting in Rapine, Plunder, and Blood-shed, according to the Usage of the *Arabs*, who mostly followed this kind of Life, being almost continually in Arms one Tribe against another, to plunder and take from each other all they could. . . .

His two predominant Passions were *Ambition* and *Lust*. The Course which he took to gain Empire, abundantly shews the former; and the multitude of Women which he had to do with, proves the latter. And indeed these two run through the whole Frame of his *Religion*, there being scarce a Chapter in his *Alcoran*, which doth not lay down some Law of War and Blood-shed for the promoting of the one; or else give some Liberty for the use of Women here, or some Promise for the enjoyment of them hereafter, to the gratifying of the other.<sup>24</sup>

But during the eighteenth century people were trying to promote a more accurate understanding of Islam. Thus in 1708 Simon Ockley produced the first volume of his *History of the Saracens*, which upset many of his readers because he did not reflexively present Islam as the religion of the sword, but tried to see the seventh-century *jihad* from the Muslim point of view. In 1734 George Sale had published a remarkable English translation of the Qu'ran which is still regarded as accurate, though it is a trifle dull. In 1751, François Voltaire published *Les Moeurs et l'esprit des nations* in which he defended Muhammad as a profound political thinker and founder of a rational religion; he pointed out that Muslim polity had

always been more tolerant than the Christian tradition. The Dutch Orientalist Johann Jakob Reiske (d. 1774) was an incomparable scholar of Arabic who could see a quality of the divine in Muhammad's life and the creation of Islam (but was hounded by some of his colleagues for his pains). During the eighteenth century, a myth was developing that presented Muhammad as a wise, rational lawgiver of the Enlightenment. Henri, Comte de Boulainvilliers, published his *Vie de Mahomed* (Paris, 1730; London, 1731), which portrayed the Prophet as a forerunner of the Age of Reason. Boulainvilliers agreed with the medievals that Muhammad had made up his religion in order to become the master of the world, but turned the whole tradition on its head. Unlike Christianity, Islam was a natural, not a revealed, tradition and that was what was so admirable about it. Muhammad was a great military hero like Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. This was another fantasy, because Muhammad was certainly no Deist, but it was at least an attempt to see the Prophet in a positive light. At the end of the century, Edward Gibbon in the fiftieth chapter of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* praised the lofty monotheism of Islam and showed that the Muslim venture deserved a place in the history of world civilisation.

But so entrenched was the old prejudice that many of these writers could not resist giving the Prophet a gratuitous swipe occasionally, demonstrating that the traditional image was not dead. Thus Simon Ockley described Muhammad as 'a very subtle and crafty man, who put on the appearance only of those good qualities, while the principles of his soul were ambition and lust'.<sup>25</sup> George Sale agreed in the introduction to his translation that 'It is certainly one of the most convincing proofs that Mohammadanism was no other than a human invention, that it owes its progress and establishment almost entirely to the sword'.<sup>26</sup> At the end of the essay *Les Moeurs*, Voltaire concluded his positive description of Islam with the observation that Muhammad had been 'regarded as a great man even by those who knew that he was an impostor and revered as a prophet by all the rest'.<sup>27</sup> In 1741 in his drama *Mahomet or Fanaticism*, Voltaire had been able to take advantage of the current prejudice to use Muhammad as an example of all the charlatans who have enslaved their people to religion by means of trickery and lies: finding some of the old legends insufficiently scurrilous, he had blithely made up some of his own. Even Gibbon had little time for Muhammad himself, arguing that he had lured the Arabs to follow him with the bait of loot and sex. As for the Muslim belief in the divine inspiration of the Qu'ran, Gibbon loftily declared it an impossible position for the truly civilised man:

This argument is most powerfully addressed to a devout Arabian whose mind is attuned to faith and rapture, whose ear is delighted by the music of sounds, and

whose ignorance is incapable of comparing the productions of human genius. The harmony and copiousness of style will not reach, in a version, the European infidel; he will peruse with impatience the endless incoherent rhapsody of fable and precept and declamation, which seldom excites a sentiment or an idea, which sometimes crawls in the dust, and is sometimes lost in the clouds.<sup>28</sup>

This shows a new Western confidence. No longer are Europeans cowering before the Islamic threat; instead they regard the Muslim religion with amused condescension, assuming that, if 'we' do not understand the Qu'ran, it must mean that there is nothing in it. In 1841, Thomas Carlyle would also dismiss the Qu'ran with contempt in his lecture on Muhammad, 'The Hero as Prophet'. This was, however, a passionate plea for Muhammad and a denial of the old medieval fantasy. For almost the first time, somebody in Europe was trying to see Muhammad as a genuinely religious man. But the Qu'ran was condemned as the most boring book in the world: 'a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite, insupportable stupidity in short'.<sup>29</sup>

At the very end of the eighteenth century, a telling incident showed the direction in which the new European confidence was tending. In 1798 Napoleon sailed to Egypt, accompanied by scores of Orientalists from his Institut d'Égypte. He intended to use all this new scholarship and understanding to subjugate the Islamic world and challenge the British hegemony of India. As soon as they landed, Napoleon sent the scholars off on what we should call a fact-finding mission, giving his officers strict instructions to follow their advice. They had obviously done their homework well. Napoleon had cynically addressed the Egyptian crowd at Alexandria with the claim: 'Nous sommes les vrais musulmans.' Then he had sixty sheikhs of al-Azhar, the great mosque in Cairo, brought with full military honours into his quarters. He carefully praised the Prophet, discussed with them Voltaire's *Mahomet* and seems to have held his own with the learned *ulema*. Nobody took Napoleon very seriously as a Muslim, but his sympathetic understanding of Islam did allay the hostility of the people to a degree. Napoleon's expedition came to nothing; he was defeated by the British and Turkish armies and sailed back to Europe.

The nineteenth century was characterised by the colonial spirit, which was giving Europeans the unhealthy belief that they were superior to other races: it was up to them to redeem the barbarous world of Asia and Africa in a *mission civilisatrice*. This inevitably affected the Western view of Islam, as the French and the British looked covetously towards the declining Ottoman empire. In the French Christian apologist François René de Chateaubriand, for example, we find a revival of the Crusading ideal which had been adapted to meet the new conditions. He had been

impressed by Napoleon's expedition, seeing him as a Crusader-pilgrim. The Crusaders had tried to bring Christianity to the East, he argued. Of all religions, Christianity was the one 'most favourable to freedom', but in the Crusading venture it had clashed with 'Islam': 'a cult that was civilization's enemy, systematically favourable to ignorance, to despotism and to slavery'.<sup>30</sup> In the heady days after the French Revolution, 'Islam' had once again become the opposite of 'us'. During the hierarchically minded Middle Ages, some critics of Islam had blamed Muhammad for giving too much power to menials, like slaves and women. This stereotype had now been reversed, not because people necessarily had a fuller knowledge of Islam but because it suited 'our' needs and was as always a foil against which we could measure our achievements.

In his bestseller *Journey from Paris to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Paris* (1810-II), Chateaubriand applied his Crusading fantasy to the situation in Palestine. The Arabs, he wrote, 'have the air of soldiers without a leader, citizens without legislators, and a family without a father'. They were an example of 'civilised man fallen again into a savage state'.<sup>31</sup> Therefore they were crying out for the control of the West, because it was impossible for them to take charge of their own affairs. In the Qu'ran there was 'neither a principle for civilisation nor a mandate that can elevate character'. Unlike Christianity, 'Islam' preaches 'neither hatred of tyranny nor love of liberty'.<sup>32</sup>

The influential French philologist Ernest Renan attempted a scientific explanation for these new racial and imperialist myths. He argued that Hebrew and Arabic were degraded languages, deviations from the Aryan tradition, which had become irredeemably flawed. These Semitic tongues could be studied only as an example of arrested development and lacked the progressive character of 'our' linguistic systems. That was why Jews and Arabs were both 'une combinaison inférieure de la nature humaine'.

One sees that in all things the Semitic race appears to us to be an incomplete race by virtue of its simplicity. This race – if I dare use the analogy – is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to a painting; it lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility. Like those individuals who possess so little fecundity that, after a gracious childhood, they attain only the most mediocre virility, the Semitic nations experienced their fullest flowering in their first age and have never been able to achieve true maturity.<sup>33</sup>

Yet again, Jews and Arabs had been fused in a single image which provides a flattering description of 'our' superior virtues. The new racism would, of course, have disastrous consequences for European Jewry.

Hitler drew upon the old Christian patterns of hatred in his secular crusade against the Jews, unable to bear the presence of an alien race on pure European and Aryan soil.

There were no Muslims left in Europe, but during the nineteenth century the British and the French began to invade their lands. In 1830 the French colonised Algiers, and in 1839 the British colonised Aden; between them they took over Tunisia (1881), Egypt (1882), the Sudan (1898) and Libya and Morocco (1912). In 1920, even though they had made pledges to the Arab countries that they would have their independence after the defeat of the Turkish empire, Britain and France carved up the Middle East between them into mandates and protectorates.

Today the Muslim world associates Western imperialism and Christian missionary work with the Crusades. They are not wrong to do so. When General Allenby arrived in Jerusalem in 1917, he announced that the Crusades had been completed, and when the French arrived in Damascus their Commander marched up to Saladin's tomb in the Great Mosque and cried: '*Nous revenons, Saladin!*' The Christian missionary effort supported the colonialists, attempting to undermine traditional Muslim culture in the conquered countries, and local Christian groups, like the Maronites of Lebanon, were given a disproportionate role in the running of the protectorate. The colonialists would have argued that they were bringing progress and enlightenment, but the effort was informed with violence and contempt. The pacification of Algeria, for example, took many years and any resistance was brutally put down in reprisal raids. The contemporary French historian M. Baudricourt gives us an idea of what one of those raids was like:

Our soldiers returning from the expedition were themselves ashamed. . . . about 18,000 trees had been burnt; women, children and old men had been killed. The unfortunate women particularly excited cupidity by the habit of wearing silver ear-rings, leg-rings and arm-rings. These rings have no catch like French bracelets. Fastened in youth to the limbs of girls they cannot be removed when they are grown up. To get them off our soldiers used to cut off their limbs and leave them alive in a mutilated condition.<sup>34</sup>

The colonialists displayed their basic contempt for Islam. In Egypt, Lord Cromer decried the attempt of the liberal intellectual Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) to rethink some traditional Islamic ideas. Islam, he declared, could not reform itself, and the Arabs were incapable of regenerating their own society. As he explained in his magisterial two-volume work *Modern Egypt*, the 'Oriental' was irredeemably childish and the diametrical opposite of 'us':

Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: 'Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo-Indian should always remember that maxim.' Want of accuracy, which easily degenerate into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind.

The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in a somewhat higher degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty. They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth.<sup>35</sup>

Even though Western scholars continued to attempt a more objective picture of the Arab and Muslim world, this colonial superiority made many people believe that 'Islam' was beneath their serious attention.

Certainly this offensive Western attitude has succeeded in alienating the Muslim world. Today anti-Western feeling seems rife in Islam, but that is an entirely new development. The West may have harboured fantasies of Muhammad as its enemy, but in fact most Muslims remained unaware of the West until just over 200 years ago. The Crusades were crucial in the history of Europe and had a formative influence on the Western identity, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> But, though they obviously deeply affected the lives of Muslims in the Near East, the Crusades had little impact on the rest of the Islamic world, where they were simply remote border incidents. The heartlands of the Islamic empire in the Iraq and Iran remained entirely unaffected by this medieval Western assault. They had, therefore, no concept of the West as their enemy. When Muslims thought of the Christian world, they did not think of the West but of Byzantium; at that time Western Europe seemed a barbarous, pagan wilderness, which was indeed far behind the rest of the civilised world.

But Europe caught up and the Muslim world, which was occupied with its own concerns, failed to notice what was happening. Napoleon's expedition to Egypt was an eye-opener for many thoughtful people in the Near East, who were much impressed by the easy, confident bearing of the French soldiers in this post-revolutionary army. Muslims had always responded to the ideas of other cultures, and many were drawn to the radical, modernising ideas of the West. At the turn of this century, nearly every leading intellectual in the Islamic world was a liberal and a Westerniser. These liberals may have hated Western imperialism, but

they imagined that liberals in Europe would be on their side and would oppose people like Lord Cromer. They admired the quality of the Western way of life, which seemed to have enshrined many ideals that were central to the Islamic tradition. In the last fifty years, however, we have lost this goodwill. One reason for the alienation of the Muslim world has been its gradual discovery of the hostility and contempt for their Prophet and their religion which is so deeply embedded in Western culture and which they consider still affects its policy towards Muslim countries even in the post-colonial period.

As the Syrian writer Rana Kabbani points out in *Letter to Christendom*:

Is the Western conscience not selective? The West feels sympathy for the Afghan Mujahedin, propped up by American intelligence just as the Nicaraguan Contras were, but feels no sympathy for militant Muslims who are not fighting its Cold War battles but have political concerns of their own. As I write, Palestinians are dying every day in the Occupied Territories – nearly 600 dead at the latest count, over 30,000 wounded and 20,000 in detention without trial. . . yet Israel remains a democracy in Western eyes, an outpost of Western civilization. What is one to think of such double standards?<sup>37</sup>

The West must bear some measure of responsibility for the development of the new radical form of Islam, which in some hideous sense comes close to our ancient fantasies. Today many people in the Islamic world reject the West as ungodly, unjust and decadent. Some Western scholars like Maxime Rodinson, Roy Mottahedeh, Nikki R. Keddie and Gilles Kepel are trying to understand the meaning of this new Islamic mood. But, as usual, these attempts to attain a more objective and sympathetic comprehension of the present crisis in the Muslim world are the concern of a minority. Other more aggressive voices show little desire to understand but promote the old tradition of hatred.

The new radical Islam is not simply inspired by hatred of the West, however. Nor is it in any sense a homogenous movement. Radical Muslims are primarily concerned to put their own house in order and to address the cultural dislocation that many have experienced in the modern period. It is really impossible to generalise about the rise of this more extreme form of the religion. It not only differs from country to country, but from town to town and from village to village. People feel cut off from their roots: Western culture has invaded the interstices of their lives. Even the furniture of their homes has undergone major change and becomes a disturbing sign of domination and cultural loss. In turning to religion, many are attempting to return to their roots and recover an identity which is profoundly threatened. But in each area, the type of Islam is entirely different and idiosyncratic and is deeply affected by local

traditions and conditions that are not specifically religious. In his classic book *Recognizing Islam, Religion and Society in the Middle East*, Michael Gilsenan has argued that the differences are so great from one district to another that the term 'Islam' or 'fundamentalism' is simply not useful in defining the current attempt to articulate the experience of people in the Middle East during the post-colonial period. The phenomenon is certainly far more complex than the media tends to suggest. Many Muslims in the area may well be experiencing rather the same sense of dread and loss of identity as that felt by the martyrs of Cordova, who felt that their culture and traditional values were being eroded by an alien power.

We constantly produce new stereotypes to express our apparently ingrained hatred of 'Islam'. In the 1970s we were haunted by the image of the immensely rich oil sheikh; in the 1980s by the fanatical ayatollah; since the Salman Rushdie affair, 'Islam' has become a religion that spells death to creativity and artistic freedom. But none of these images reflects the reality, which is infinitely more complex. Yet this does not stop people from making sweeping and inaccurate judgements. Rana Kabbani cites two hostile remarks by Fay Weldon and Conor Cruise O'Brien. In *Sacred Cows*, her contribution to the Rushdie debate, Weldon writes:

The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which a society can be safely or sensibly based. It gives weapons and strength to the thought-police – and the thought-police are easily set marching, and they frighten . . . I see it as a limited and limiting text when it comes to the comprehension of what I define as God.<sup>38</sup>

I can only say that this remark does not cohere with my own experience of studying the Qu'ran and the history of Islam. But Conor Cruise O'Brien, reverting to the tradition that makes any respect for Islam a cultural defection, would call me a hypocrite. Muslim society, he writes,

looks profoundly repulsive . . . It looks repulsive because it is repulsive . . . A Westerner who claims to admire Muslim society, while still adhering to Western values, is either a hypocrite or an ignoramus or a bit of both.

He concluded: 'Arab society is sick, and has been sick for a long time. In the last century, the Arab [*sic*] thinker Jamal al-Afghani wrote: "Every Muslim is sick, and his only remedy is in the Koran." Unfortunately the sickness gets worse the more the remedy is taken.'<sup>39</sup>

But not all critics take this Crusading line. Many scholars in our own century have tried to enlarge the Western understanding of Islam: Louis Massignon, H. A. R. Gibb, Henri Corbin, Annemarie Schimmel, Marshall G. S. Hodgson and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. They have followed in the footsteps of people like Peter the Venerable and John of Segovia and

have used scholarship to challenge the prejudice of their time. Religion has for centuries enabled members of a given society to cultivate serious understanding. People may not always succeed in expressing their religious ideals as they should, but they have helped notions of justice, benevolence, respect and compassion for others to provide a standard against which we can measure our behaviour. A serious study of Islam shows that for 1,400 years the ideals of the Qu'ran have contributed in large measure to the spiritual welfare of Muslims. Some scholars, like the outstanding Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith, would go so far as to say that 'the Muslim segment of human society can only flourish if Islam is strong and vital, is pure and creative and sound.'<sup>40</sup> Part of the Western problem is that for centuries Muhammad has been seen as the antithesis of the religious spirit and as the enemy of decent civilisation. Instead, perhaps, we should try to see him as a man of the spirit, who managed to bring peace and civilisation to his people.

## 2 · Muhammad the Man of al-Llah

During the month of Ramadan in about the year 610, an Arab merchant of the city of Mecca in the Hijaz had an experience that would ultimately change the history of the world. Each year Muhammad ibn Abdallah retired with his wife and family to a cave on Mount Hira in the Meccan valley to make a spiritual retreat. This was quite common practice in the Arabian peninsula at that time: Muhammad would have spent the month in prayer and would have distributed alms and food to the poor who came to visit him during this sacred period. From the jagged mountain-top the thriving city of Mecca was clearly visible in the plain below. Like all Meccans, Muhammad was very proud of his city, which had become a centre of finance and the most powerful settlement in Arabia. The Meccan merchants had become wealthier than any other Arabs in the Hijaz and enjoyed a security that would have been inconceivable two generations earlier, when they would have been living the grim nomadic life of the Arabian steppes. Above all, the Meccans were fiercely proud of the Ka'aba, the ancient cube-shaped shrine in the centre of the city which, many believed, was really the Temple of al-Llah, the High God of the Arabs. It was the most important shrine in Arabia and each year pilgrims came from all parts of the peninsula to make the *hajj* pilgrimage. The tribe of Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe, had been responsible for the commercial success of Mecca and they knew that a great deal of their prestige among the other Arab tribes was due to the fact that they had the great privilege of guarding the huge granite shrine and ensuring that its sanctities were preserved.

Some of the Arabs believed that al-Llah, whose name simply meant 'the God', was the deity who was also worshipped by the Jews and the Christians.<sup>1</sup> But unlike the 'people of the scriptures', as the Arabs called these two venerable faiths, the Arabs were painfully aware that He had never sent them a revelation or a scripture of their own, even though they had had His shrine in their midst from time immemorial. Those Arabs who came into contact with the Jews and Christians felt an acute sense of inferiority: it seemed as though God had left the Arabs out of His divine